



# Design Online Discussions to Promote Active Learning

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*What does active learning look like in the online discussion?*

*What are some activities that you could do to engage students in the online discussions?*

The discussion board is the heart and soul of the online learning community (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016). As an asynchronous tool, discussions provide a way for students to process, analyze and synthesize information. Mintz (2020) highlighted the importance of active learning online in discussing the future of online education. Here are some ideas for discussion board activities that encourage active learning, critical thinking, exploration, and reflection as well interaction amongst students.

## **1. Introductions**

In an online environment, students often find themselves battling with feelings of isolation, confusion, and frustration particularly for those who are new to the online environment. Online instructors have to deliberately, consistently, and relentlessly work to build an online learning community to enhance student sense of belonging (Wehler, 2018). Besides a welcome video and/or message, discussion boards could contribute a great deal in building community by starting a conversation. Ask students to introduce themselves with some guided questions such as an interesting fact about themselves, what is the most recent book they've read, select a word that best describes them, share one learning outcome, etc. Include low-stake discussion topics for social interaction throughout the semester, such as course café where students can hang out in a virtual place and share things like recipes, a cool tweet, or a great piece of news. Icebreaker activities could also be implemented online to get students familiar with each other and help build an online learning community. The participation for the introductory discussion activities could be optional and do not need to be graded.

## **2. Case Studies and Problem-based Learning**

Case studies have been widely used in all disciplines when students are required to apply their existing knowledge and skills to a real-world situation or scenario. Case studies could provide opportunities for students to further develop analytical, problem-solving, critical thinking, and decision-making skills. Very similar to case studies in a classroom, online case studies start with a case prepared by instructors or students and are presented on the discussion board. The case could be simple or complex depending on the course learning outcomes. It tends to be more interesting if the cases are not straight-forward: controversial or debatable issues tend to spark more conversations. Students can bring in personal experience and research as they discuss the case in groups or whole class. An additional trick is to add

new information after a few days – how does that affect the conversation? Change assumptions? to challenge students to reveal new strategies and keep the conversation going.

Similar to case studies, problem-based learning could provide opportunities for students to practice and develop analytical and problem-solving skills. Dividing students in groups and providing them with a real-world problem or an ill-defined problem could also help develop online collaborative learning skills.

### **3. Dialogue Debrief**

Online learning does not mean that learning is restricted to only the online environment. This activity could not only get students to reach out and interact with someone outside of the class with a fresh perspective, but also hone interviewing skills for further research purposes. Ask students to interview someone in person such as family or friends, or someone in the profession such as doctors, nurses, social workers, teachers, engineers, etc. All students could ask the same questions and then post answers to the discussion board to see a range of responses to the same questions.

### **4. Peer Feedback**

The instructor does not need to be only one who provides feedback on student work. Students could also provide each other with feedback, but not to grade one another. Students could review peer assignments or projects and give comments and suggestions. Peer feedback provides students with opportunities to learn from each other – students could gain strategies and gauge their own progress in relation to another students' work. Without the opportunities for students to discuss and listen in a physical space, clarity is important to ensure that students provide meaningful feedback and receive feedback well. It could be useful to provide a template for writing feedback, such as three strengths and at least one area for improvement. An example of what meaningful feedback might look like could also be a useful strategy to help students understand the expectations of peer feedback. You may want to consider giving a small percentage, such as 5% in a project that is worth 40%, for feedback that students give, to enhance the quality of the feedback. Set firm due dates to ensure that students have the time to read and construct feedback. Plan a short synchronous session or online collaboration about what feedback means and coach students on how to provide quality feedback.

### **5. Resource Review & Sharing**

With endless waves of information on the web and our fingertips, how do you know what is valid? It is common for students to surf on the Internet and find information for study purposes. This activity asks students to review a resource or content on a website and then share and discuss their learnings by responding to guiding questions. Would you recommend this website to your classmates? Why do you think this website is valuable for learning? As a result, a list of resources could be generated by students and course content could be greatly enriched. At the end of this activity, students could also create guidelines collaboratively in evaluating the validity of information found on websites.

Example from an online course in social work provided by Dr. Jessica Ayala, PhD;

*“As we learned in Unit 1, sexuality related information is everywhere, and the media is a key source of information for both individuals and professionals. Not surprisingly, many people use the Internet as a source of information on sexuality issues such as contraception and abortion.*

*Visit a website related to the course (from the websites listed below or one you have found on your own), then post a brief review about your website on the discussion board. You may want to discuss aspects such as:*

- *The site's main message/content,*
- *Bias/perspective,*
- *Best/worst feature, and*
- *Would you recommend this website to others? Why or why not?*

*Finally, please suggest to the class one "tip" for reviewing information on the Internet. My hope is that we can come up with a set of guidelines that we (and our clients) may find useful in evaluating the validity of information found on the web.*

*Please also take the time to read and comment on at least one of your classmates' reviews!*

*If you are posting a review on a website that another classmate has already posted on, please do your review/reply in the same thread by replying to their review.”*

## **6. “In the News”**

What is happening around the world? What is a hit in the news? Bring current events and issues that are relevant with course content to the discussions to engage students in the real-world context. Post the news or story with a link for students to read more about, prompt students to think about the relationships between course concepts and the story, and encourage students to share what is going on in their local community relating to this issue. This activity could provide opportunities for students to apply knowledge and analytical thinking skills through expressing their reactions and thoughts about the news as well as connecting with what they know and how they feel.

Example from an online course in social work provided by Dr. Jessica Ayala, PhD;

*“Subject: Sexuality in the News: Trudeau Promises ‘Full Protection with Transgender Rights Bill’*

*Hi all,*

*You may have noticed that transgender rights have been in the news quite a bit lately. The latest was today, when Trudeau said, "I am proud to announce that tomorrow, on the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia, we will be tabling a bill in the House of Commons to ensure the full protection of transgender people." So, that is something to keep an eye out for in the news tomorrow (Tuesday)! [Click here for today's story.](#) At the bottom of the story, you will find a video clip that you may find interesting (9 minutes, Power Panel: Transgender Rights Legislation).*

*Meanwhile in Alberta... [Protest Groups Clash Over bill 10 at Alberta Legislature Grounds.](#) Both pro- and anti- Bill 10 groups had rallies over the weekend. As you may know, Bill 10 in Alberta*

*brings some LGBTQ-related rights to kids in Alberta schools, such as the right to establish gay-straight alliances in schools.*

*I'm interested in your reactions to these stories. Does anything stand out for you? What do you see the role of social work in relation to this issue at both micro and macro levels?*

*Jessica”*

## **7. Guest Speakers**

It is a common teaching strategy to invite guest speakers to present in a face-to-face classroom. The field expertise and experiences that the guest speaker brings into the classroom exposes students to different perspectives and voices, adds variety to the classroom routine, and demonstrates that learning is a collaborative process (Laist, 2015). In an online course, guest speakers could be invited for a live-stream talk via a synchronous conferencing tool or to join discussion boards for a limited time to share thoughts and answer questions. Make sure that guest speaker bios and other resources are posted prior to the speaking session or discussion activity. If the guest speaker participates asynchronously, ensure that the guest speaker has access to the course and a dedicated discussion board is created for them.

Example from an online course in social work provided by Dr. Jessica Ayala, PhD;

*“We will have a guest speaker join our discussion board from March 8-March 15<sup>th</sup>. XX is the Education Coordinator for the Alberta Society for the Promotion of Sexual Health (ASPSH) and Past Executive Director of Planned Parenthood Alberta. Please read XX’s bio in the Unit 3 area and review the two resources about sexuality education that she has shared with us. X is looking forward to our questions and to discussing issues about sexuality education with all of us. Feel free to post your questions, comments or topics for discussion in the ‘guest speaker’ discussion board in Unit 3. I will get our discussion with X started by posting the first question.”*

## **8. Students Lead/Facilitate**

At the beginning of the course, the instructor is usually the facilitator of the discussion boards. Once students are comfortable with the settings and navigation, it is powerful to allow students to take on more responsibilities and ownership of learning. This activity provides opportunities for students to lead the discussions with developing and managing at least one question or topic for discussions. Students could lead/facilitate in groups or individually depending on the number of students in the class. The responsibilities for the student who is leading the discussion may include:

- Selecting a question/topic/unit of their choice for this purpose
- Posting a question or topic for discussion which relates to the question/topic/unit being discussed
- Managing the discussion relating to this question/topic/unit – e.g. responding to your classmates’ comments and questions, adding further questions, sharing a related resource with classmates, summarizing the discussion.

Note that students need to be reminded to set up the discussion early such as posting their question(s) in order to allow sufficient time for the class to actively participate in the discussions.

## 9. Small Group Discussions

When multiple topics are being discussed, discussion posts and replies could become challenging to follow. Smaller groups discussions will allow students in the same groups to get to know each other better and are more likely to have a deeper discussion. In a large enrollment class, creating smaller discussion groups is pivotal as this practice will help enhance the sense of belonging and form a learning community in small groups.

Example from an online course in social work provided by Dr. Jessica Ayala, PhD;

Watch a Film on Sexuality Issues Facing Children and Youth

*“Watch your choice of one (or more!) of the five documentaries below, all available online. Then go into the discussion board for the film you selected and post your reactions/learnings from the film, and discuss with others. Your discussions may involve (but are not limited to) the following:*

- *What you learned about children and youth sexuality;*
- *What surprised/impacted you the most; and*
- *What you learned from this film that relates to your social work practice.*

*As our discussions develop, I encourage you to respond/reply/add to existing discussions relating to your film, rather than starting a new thread. I am hoping that our discussions will be interactive and organic, rather than everyone posting their thoughts separately.”*

## 10. Field Trips

Learning happens beyond the computers and classroom walls. Students learn from observing, interacting, and experiencing in all kinds of environments outside of everyday learning activities. Safety permitting, you could consider sending students to explore relevant field trip sites including zoos, hospitals, local businesses, factories, community centres, science museums, parks, or geological landscapes, etc. Provide questions that connect with the course content and learning outcomes for students to think about and take notes while they are observing and experiencing. Ask students to bring back their findings and reflections to share with the whole class in the online discussions.

Example from an online course in social work provided by Dr. Jessica Ayala, PhD;

Field Trip to the Contraceptive Aisle

*“Hi all,*

*Next time you go shopping at the grocery store or visit a pharmacy, I suggest you take a walk by the contraceptive aisle. Chapter 7 reviews a wide range of contraceptive methods, but as learning exercise 2.3 points out (unit 2 exercises), actual use of contraceptives is impacted by a*

*variety of factors - including their availability and cost. What contraceptive methods are available at your local grocery store or pharmacy? What is their cost? Please share your findings with us!*

*A piece of advice from past classes and fieldtrips... beware of expired contraceptives!*

*I'm looking forward to your findings, and to your reflections about what it was like for you to spend some time in the contraceptive aisle!"*

## **11. Debates**

Online debates could happen synchronously via a video-conferencing tool or asynchronously via discussion boards. Prior to the debates, students could be divided into two private discussion groups to prepare for the actual debate. The process of asynchronous online debate might start with a debatable or controversial topic along with a thought-provoking question with no straight right or wrong answers. Students who are in the same group research for evidence to support their statement and collaboratively write a short essay to make an argument. After all groups submit their final essays to online discussions, students review each other's work and vote for the most compelling argument.

## **12. Role Play**

In small discussion groups, each student takes on a role with its specific responsibilities to perform accordingly. The instructor provides students with instructions and task lists for each role. Students could decide on roles based on their interest and strengths or after discussing with their peers. Students could also share one role or rotate roles to exercise different skill sets required from different roles.

### **Example of *Literature Circle* discussion activity from the Teaching Online Program:**

The *Literature Circle* activity was modified from a literature reading and sharing activity commonly used in K-12. In a group of four students, each student takes turns to be a director, connector, wordsmith, or reporter. Each specific role in the group discussions has specific responsibilities:

**Director:** The lead of discussion. Director is responsible for checking in, extending the ideas and thoughts, ask questions to dig deeper, and playing devil's advocate.

**Connector:** Responds from experience rather than books. Connector shares from experience and find patterns and pathways to create deeper connections with the content

**Wordsmith:** Stone cold fact checker. Wordsmith brings evidence informed practice to the table. Finds credible sources to help point students in new directions or validate practices.

**Reporter:** Responsible for summarizing. Reporter could sit back and relax during the discussion but is responsible for summarizing the dialogue in a concise and creative way that is inclusive of all voices, key findings and evidence.

The benefit of this role play discussion activity is that it provides inclusivity to the online discussions and potentially maximizes the opportunity to engage quiet students by giving them a role and a voice.

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